

# Wellness Notes

## Hearing Loss\*

(Part I)

Hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults. Roughly one-third of Americans 65 to 74 years of age and 47 percent of those 75 and older have hearing loss. People with hearing loss find it difficult to talk with friends and family. They may also have trouble understanding a doctor's advice, responding to warnings, and hearing doorbells and alarms.

Hearing loss comes in many forms. It can range from a mild loss in which a person misses certain high-pitched sounds, such as the voices of women and children, to a total loss of hearing. It can be hereditary or it can result from disease, trauma, certain medications, or long-term exposure to loud noise.

There are two general categories of hearing loss: sensorineural and conductive hearing loss. Sensorineural hearing loss occurs when there is damage to the inner ear or the auditory nerve. This type of hearing loss is permanent. Conductive hearing loss occurs when sound waves cannot reach the inner ear. The cause may be earwax build-up, fluid, or a punctured eardrum. Medical or surgical treatment can usually restore conductive hearing loss.

One form of hearing loss, presbycusis, comes on gradually as a person ages. Presbycusis hearing loss can occur because of changes in the inner ear, auditory nerve, middle ear, or outer ear. Some of its causes are aging, loud noise, heredity, head injury, infection, illness, certain prescription drugs, and circulation problems such as high blood pressure. Presbycusis commonly affects people over 50, many of whom are likely to lose some hearing each year. Having presbycusis may make it hard for a person to tolerate loud sounds or to hear what others are saying.

Tinnitus, also common in older people, is the ringing, hissing, or roaring sound in the ears frequently caused by exposure to loud noise or certain medicines. Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease, so it can accompany any type of hearing loss. Tinnitus can also be a sign of other important health problems, such as allergies and problems in the heart and blood vessels. Tinnitus can come and go, or it can persist or stop altogether.

Some people may not want to admit they have trouble hearing. Older people who can't hear well may become depressed or withdraw from others to avoid feeling frustrated or embarrassed about not understanding what is being said. It is easy to mistakenly call older people confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative just because they don't hear well.

Hearing problems that are ignored or untreated can get worse. If you have a hearing problem, you can get help. See your doctor. Hearing aids, special training, certain medicines, and surgery are some of the choices that can help people with hearing problems.